

Andrew N. Weintraub. *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004. Interactive multimedia CD-ROM. 320 pp.

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The phrase “power plays” in the title gives a clue to what Andrew Weintraub emphasizes as the main focus of the book: how *wayang golek* (puppet theater) and the *dalang* (puppeteer) are involved in power plays, especially between the state, on the one hand, and *wayang golek* audiences, on the other. The *dalang* are “information officers” for the government, which is one of their major sponsors, yet “their popularity and appeal”—which they need to become successful *dalang*—“[rest] largely on their ability to represent the voices of ordinary people” (12). Weintraub writes: “As I watched these *dalang* perform, the formulation of *wayang golek* as a dialogic space—where competing discourses about nation, culture, and representation intersected—emerged as the focus of this book” (22). “The profound contradiction between the *dalang*’s role as a potential information officer and his impulse to elicit pleasure and enjoyment from his audience emerged as a crucible of social tension between official discourse and popular consciousness” (12).

I find the emphasis on the paradoxical, contradictory function of *dalang* appealing: they have to negotiate and play between the different powers. The *wayang golek* performance, even when sponsored by the government, is never just a piece of government propaganda; there is much more to the performance than the government’s messages, and even as the *dalang* introduces those messages, he may present them in such a way that their meaning is changed or even subverted. Moreover, the audiences are not “empty vessels,” and, with or without the *dalang*’s help, they receive critically what they hear and see. The book offers numerous convincing illustrations of this process.

Weintraub’s model of politics in *Power Plays* is not simplistic. Still, if I were to read the title and some of the passages in the book that explain the book’s “focus” out of context, I might get the impression that the focus on politics and power plays is somewhat reductive and that the book fails to show the multifarious nature and richness of a *wayang* performance. I might further get the wrong impression that the state, on the one hand, and the “voices of the people,” on the other, are the main players in the plays and that the book ignores the many other forces and players, such as the commercial interests of *dalang*, sponsors, and other parties. After reading the whole book, these impressions turn out not to be true. To those readers who are interested primarily in the politics of *wayang*, a careful reading of the book will show how the “power plays” of *wayang* penetrate its every aspect (from jokes in the dialogues to musical tuning and the visual appearances of the puppets); how the state is not the only, and sometimes not the dominant, power shaping *wayang* (the *dalang*’s and sponsor’s interests, often commercial, and the mass media are some of the other forces); and that the plays that go on in *wayang golek* cannot be fully understood in terms of power alone. To those whose primary interest is not political power or the issue of the state’s involvement with *wayang* but who want to understand *wayang golek* more broadly as a performance and as a social event, the book can serve as an extremely rich and well-informed source on *wayang golek* performances, and over and

over it gives a sense of their liveliness, power, and variety. Like a good *wayang* performance, the book is much more than any one person's view of it.

Through descriptions of actual performances and performers, excerpts from dialogues, and analyses of selected issues and aspects of *wayang golek*, the book provides a rich, lively, and quite holistic picture of *wayang golek*. Aside from Weintraub's interest in politics, there are some phenomena that are given special attention: there is, for example, a very good discussion of *dalang* competitions, their politics, and their impact on performance practice; a good, critical discussion of Sundanese writings on *wayang golek*, including the notions of what is correct, the perception of "entertainment," and so on; analysis of the emergence of the "superstar *dalang*"; a fascinating chapter on the development and use of "multilaras gamelan," which enables performers to perform compositions in different tunings and in different genres and thus to add to the appeal of the performance; and there is an extensive discussion of the interaction between the cassette, radio, and television industries. The accompanying CD-ROM adds value to the book: there is one folder with musical examples, and there is an interactive multimedia introduction to *wayang golek* that includes video clips, musical examples, and pictures (my favorites include a video clip showing a puppet vomiting noodles, and another video clip showing—also a puppet vomiting noodles).

For anyone familiar with contemporary forms of *wayang* in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, Weintraub's book on Sundanese *wayang golek* offers fascinating material for comparison, especially with respect to recent developments in performances and the changes in the lives and work of puppeteers. For example, Central Javanese *wayang* is, in what has become its mainstream, dominant form, comparable to the kind of *wayang golek* that Weintraub writes about, as epitomized in the performances of a few superstar puppeteers. One can reflect on the differences as well as the many similarities and continuities between the mainstream Javanese *wayang kulit* and Sundanese *wayang golek*—the changes in the two forms of theater have much in common, from comparable changes in performance (moving toward spectacular, entertaining performances with much humor, violent fighting scenes, new music, and so on) to the forces shaping the theater (people's familiarity with other entertainments, involvement with mass media, politics, and so on) and the debates surrounding *wayang* and its development. Weintraub's book, the first of its kind on Sundanese *wayang golek*, will give us a better understanding, not only of *wayang golek*, but also of the diversity and continuities of different forms of *wayang* in Indonesia.

There can never be a definitive or complete account of *wayang golek*—because it is a phenomenon so rich, so diverse, so alive and ever changing, every book will have its focus and limits. Weintraub's book focuses on recent developments and changes in *wayang golek*—certainly the greatest gap in studies on *wayang golek*. Although conventional performance technique, the plots and stories, the making and working of the puppets, or the conventional function of music in the theater are not discussed in detail, his examination of recent developments in the theater is rooted in a good understanding of the theater as a whole. As Weintraub acknowledges (235), the superstar puppeteers, their performances, and their world are his focus, and the performances and worlds of "those *dalang* who do not occupy positions of power in the sphere of *padalangan*" are beyond the scope of the book. I would add to this that certain

puppeteers, especially the very popular Asep Sunandar Sunarya, have shaped Weintraub's thinking, and he sometimes has less sympathy for opposing views. For example, while I agree with Weintraub and Asep about the importance of entertainment, and about the point that critiques of innovative performances are often extremely reductive and prescriptive rather than perceptive of what is actually happening in the real world, there could be a little more attention paid to what is lost in the new-style performances. In other words, in addition to showing the excitement, power, and importance of Asep's performances, one could show "the other side of the coin" as well—what of *wayang golek* had to be sacrificed in the process of creating the new mass *wayang*, and how some of the richness and complexity of the more conventional performances, as well as the variety of personal and regional styles, might be missed by at least a minority of *wayang* spectators today, even though not by others. Perhaps it is not *only* "regulatory interests" that are challenged by popular *wayang* performances; it is also possible that for some people—not necessarily the academic critics or people associated with the government that Weintraub quotes—the new performances have lost something present in the older performances that they genuinely valued and enjoyed.

However, exactly what Weintraub pays special attention to and what he leaves out do not determine the value of the book. *Power Plays* makes for enjoyable and inspiring reading because one can feel from the first page that the author has had a long, deep involvement with *wayang golek*. It becomes clear that he is familiar with all aspects of the theater; has been to many actual performances rather than just reading about them; has interacted with people involved with *wayang golek*; knows well many performers and has a profound admiration for many of them; is aware of how each *dalang* is different as a person and as a performer; and loves *wayang golek*—the music, the jokes, the spectacle, the atmosphere. Thus, this book is written by someone who knows *wayang golek* profoundly, firsthand, from experience. This, in combination with the high quality of Weintraub's rigorous and extensive research, is what makes the book great and genuinely important, and it makes me think that any criticism I can come up with is somewhat trivial.

One could say that the book fills a gap—there is no comparable publication that discusses contemporary Sundanese *wayang golek* performances and performers in such depth. But one should look further, beyond Sunda, and see this work also as a contribution to the larger field of studies of Indonesian and Southeast Asian theater, for even in this larger field Weintraub's book holds a special place and can be seen as a model study. It contributes to existing discussions, but also opens up new space since many of its important questions and approaches have yet to be adequately explored beyond Sunda by scholars of other regions and other forms of theater.